Article

What Do You Meme? The Sociolinguistic Potential of Internet Memes

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1. Introduction

Although the word "meme" has gained a footing in everyday colloquial language, the term, surprisingly, pre-dates the existence of the Internet, as we know it today. Originally, a meme was a concept conceived within the field of evolutionary biology, denoting a unit for carrying cultural information from brain to brain. Today, the term meme is used to describe a specific type of Internet phenomena, that being Internet memes. The invention of the Internet allowed for cultural information to be distributed faster than ever to a broad audience. Internet memes can likewise be considered carriers of information, as they are digital artifacts that are socially created and distributed with an intention of meaningful communication.

Because Internet memes have both creational/distributive and social as well as communicative features, this paper will focus on how these respectively contribute to constitute a sociolinguistic potential. Initially, I will explore how memes are created and consequently distributed through the lenses of different theoretical approaches (i.e. Dawkinsian memetics contested by Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome theory). Viewing Internet memes as rhizomatic rather than purely memetic acknowledge them as having inherently social features. I will argue that the creation and distribution of memes necessarily entail social interactions within a participatory culture: establishing that Internet memes have creational/distributive and social features allows for them to be viewed as form of communication. Their communicative features rely on memes in creating meaning as well as that meaning being interpreted in a social setting. Lastly, I will explore some of the linguistic features that can be argued to apply to Internet memes in order to account for them as being a form of communication. The linguistic theories in use positions memes linguistically at the intersection between semiotics and pragmatics. Subsequently, through examples of a specific Internet meme, I will

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illustrate how the discussed theories can be applied to Internet memes in order to interpret their meaning. I will specifically illustrate how speech act theory can apply to a limited set of Internet memes.

2. What is a meme?

In this section, I will look into the origin of the term "meme" and its Internet counterpart's creational and distributive features. Moreover, I will explore the appropriation of the term into Internet discourse and consequently what is to be understood of a "meme" in the digital age. In relation to this, I will seek to make a distinction between Internet memes and so-called viral media and furthermore look into how memes come about and eventually "die out". Lastly, in an attempt to contend Dawkins' ideas on memetics, I will seek to bridge the concept of Internet memes with Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome theory.

2.1 "Meme": the new replicator

As mentioned in the introduction, the term "meme" was invented long before the dawn of the Internet by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in his 1976 work *The Selfish Gene*. A meme, Dawkins argues, is the cultural counterpart to the biological gene. Much like a gene, the meme is a replicator - or, as Dawkins ([1976] 2016, 249, his own italics) puts it, "a unit of *imitation*". Etymologically speaking, the word meme is derived from the Greek word *mimema*, meaning "imitated thing". Note also the close phonetic resemblance of meme to the word gene; even at its linguistic core, the term meme is an imitator. But while the gene conveys biological information, the meme, on the other hand, serves as a cultural transmission of human behavior and/or phenomena: "Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches" (249) - just to name a few. Another example could also be this very paper.

The brain is the main vehicle for the propagation of the meme, from where it has the possibility of replicating by the act of imitation. In order for a meme (of any sort) to enter the meme pool, it will have to "infect" the mind - much like the way a "virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell" (250). The mimicry, or imitation, thus happens as the meme leaps from one brain to others – as a virus would spread from body to body. The transmission of a meme can be illustrated as such: Imagine a song being played on the radio; someone listens to it, gets it "stuck" in their head, subsequently shares it with their social circles and possibly even hums it in the streets. Here, a passerby will catch on to it and so another mind has been "infected" (249-252). The song, or the meme, enters the meme pool as soon as the song is being realized by the artist and subsequently distributed to an

audience. From then on, the meme evolves as its own small unit of culture as it is being distributed, replicated, and imitated.

However, as with genes, memes are prone to natural selection, and some will necessarily die out. At any given time, memes are competing against other memes in order to secure their survival. Some memes will therefore group themselves together with other memes, creating what Dawkins calls "co-adapted meme complexes" (256), also referred to as memeplexes. Limor Shifman uses the example of "democracy" to illustrate what a meme complex may be: the meme "democracy" would include several "submemeplexes such as human rights and free regular elections, which can further be broken down to respective memes" (Shifman 2014, 10). The effectiveness, or successfulness, of a meme's survival is not only determined by its ability to sustain through competition, as well as infecting as many brains as possible: other factors include longevity, fecundity, and copying-fidelity (Dawkins 2016, 251). Although Dawkins admits that the longevity (the duration of which a meme can survive) of a specific meme is of relatively little concern, it still suggests that there is somewhat of a temporal aspect to the transmission of memes that thus affects its survival. Though, of greater importance is the meme's fecundity, which has to do with its capacity to replicate. Lastly, the copying-fidelity of a meme pertains to its ability to stay "true" to its original form. Because memes are spread from brain to brain, i.e. via mental processes or human interaction, there is a slight chance that a meme will pass on in an altered form. As mentioned before, if we were to consider this paper a meme, the copying-fidelity would probably be relatively low: in the process of conveying (imitation) other researcher's ideas (memes), there will necessarily be a change in the outcome (replication). In other words, the meme will have mutated making it slightly different from its original copy.

2.2 The meme in the digital age

Dawkins' meme-gene-analogy inspired an entire academic discourse and school of thought dubbed "memetics", attracting researchers from many different fields. Though in recent terms, the meme has made its way outside of an academic circle. With the technological advances made since Dawkins published his work, specifically the emergence of the Internet, the term has been appropriated into the Internet sphere shaping its meaning in a new direction (note that in this process, the term has been imitated, replicated, remixed; memetic behavior, in the Dawkinsian sense, in a nut shell). An entire generation of netizens (i.e. person(s) involved with one or more online communities or the Internet in general) knows of the meme not as small replicating units of culture (cf. Dawkins), but rather as digital artifacts.

Mike Godwin was presumably one of the first people to adopt the term into the Internet sphere. In 1994, he wrote an article for the online tech-magazine *Wired*, where he expressed his frustration with what he referred to as the "nazi-comparison meme" (Godwin 1994), which he had encountered some years earlier in various Usenet discussions. As a reaction to this, he created a counter-meme, which was later dubbed "Godwin's Law": an Internet adage which posits that "if you mention Adolf Hitler or Nazis within a discussion thread, you've automatically ended whatever discussion you were taking part in" (KnowYourMeme 2009a). Much to Godwin's surprise, the meme took off and began to circulate online without his intervention, to which he remarked: "[Godwin's Law] was reproducing on its own! And it mutated like a meme" (Godwin 1994).

With the Internet came an immense platform for sharing, circulating, distributing, and spreading information/content at an incredible speed while being connected to a large network, transcending local, geographical boundaries. These aspects combined constitute the perfect conditions for the transmission of memes and enable their survival, making the synthesis of memetic theory and the Web seem prolific. Yet, the term meme in a digital environment is different from that which pertains to evolutionary biology, albeit with shared common features. Instead, Shifman (2014, 41) defines (Internet) memes as:

> (a) [A] group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users.

The early Internet meme Godwin's Law is only one example of many, though, as the meme in an Internet sphere may be a phrase or a sound-, video-, or, perhaps the most prevalent form, an image file (the latter of which is what this paper specifically focuses on). This specific format is referred to as an image macro: this being a captioned image with superimposed text, often in an "all-caps, black-bordered white Impact font" (McCulloch 2019, 242). Some of the most notorious Internet memes to initially employ said format, are *LOLcats* - as seen in (1), (2) - and *Advice Animals* (3), (4):

(1) LOLcat (KnowYourMeme 2008).

(2) LOLcat (KnowYourMeme 2009b).

(3) Philosoraptor (KnowYourMeme 2011).

(4) Good Guy Greg (KnowYourMeme 2012).

Both *LOLcats* and *Advice Animals* rose to prominence in the mid-2000s on anonymous discussion forums such as Reddit and 4chan. *LOLcats* based its common stance on what seems to be the Internet's shared love for cats, combined with a "more or less unified set of linguistic references" (McCulloch 2019, 245), which crystallized as a form of broken English known as LOLspeak (resulting in a collective translation of the Bible into it). As a meme-category, *Advice Animals* seemed a lot more fragmented with its multiple subgenres, manifested as different archetypical stock-characters, as represented in (3), the *Philosoraptor* (a raptor immersed in deep thought), and *Good Guy Greg* (a man who, contrary to common belief, is empathetic and kind-hearted. The antithesis to a third *Advice Animal* called *Scumbag Steve*) shown in (4). Nevertheless, what seems to be the common denominator for both are not only their popularity and cult-status within Internet communities, but also their ability to democratize the memescape of their time. McCulloch (250) attributes this to the fact that both formats (especially *Advice Animals*) were enabled through meme generation websites, which allowed for almost anyone on the Internet to intervene in the creation, repackaging, and distribution of memes: Internet memes had come to stay, infecting brains along the way – they had gone "viral", so to say.

2.2.1 Meme or viral media?

Using epidemiology as a model, Dawkins argues that the meme behaves as a virus with the ability to "infect" its host's brain – meaning that the meme in itself is viral. In an Internet discourse, "viral" is used to denote something (an information event, which may be in the form of a video, image, etc.) that spreads quickly as "a [word-of-mouth]-like cascade diffusion process" (Hemsley and Mason 2013, 144) and has a broad reach. The term is often used interchangeably with (Internet) memes. However, scholars seem to agree that there is a clear distinction between the two, as McCullouch (2019, 240) remarks: "[a] meme in the internet sense isn't just something popular, a video or image or phrase that go viral. It's something that's remade and recombined, spreading as an atom of Internet culture."

According to Hemsley and Mason (2013, 146) virals are events that are both "topically and temporally bound", suggesting that viral media are singular occurrences, whereas Internet memes, cf. Shifman's definition (see section 2.2), are a collection of digital items that are shared and altered over and over: a unit, so to say.

The video *Charlie Bit My Finger* is an example of viral media. It was uploaded to YouTube in 2007 and quickly gained the Internet's attention. The clip features two brothers, whereof the youngest bites the older brother, prompting the bitten brother to exclaim: "Ouch, Charlie, that really hurt" (HDCYT 2007). For some time, *Charlie Bit My Finger* claimed the spot as YouTube's most watched video, the ultimate achievement for any viral media. Yet, the success did not stop there, for as Shifman (2014, 56) remarks: "purely viral content probably does not exist - once a photo, or a video, reaches a certain degree of popularity on the Web, you can bet that someone, somewhere, will alter it." And so the Internet did. The viral media in question – in this case the video *Charlie Bit My Finger* – subsequently inspires a new category of Internet memes (one may call it a process of "memefication") where it will serve as a backdrop for memetic outcome/derivations. This new category could take different shapes and forms as shown in the following:

(5) Original

(6) Remix

(7) Mimicry

(Shifman 2014, 21)

The original viral video (5) is not in itself memetic media; rather it inspires the production of it as seen in (6) and (7). Both examples (6) and (7) have undergone mechanisms of repackaging in the form of remixing and mimicry respectively. Where remixing involves some technical manipulation, for instance photoshopping the face of the character Leonidas (which is a meme in itself) from the movie *300* onto the viral, the act of mimicry, instead, involves the practice of "re-doing", impersonation, or imitation. This process can be repeated over and over again, and *if* successful (remember Dawkins' criteria from section 2.1), it could result in the meme being distributed to all nooks and crannies of the Internet, thereby infecting more and more brains, and thus securing its survival.

2.2.2 The Death of Memes

Over the course of time, the memescape has expanded as transmission has become quicker and more easily accessible, this due to the fact that Internet usage has shifted from desktops to laptops and furthermore to portable devices such as smartphones and tablets. Moreover, memes do not solely exist on discussion boards anymore; rather, they have spilled over to different social media platforms, thus increasing their extent and therefore accessibility to a mass audience. Due to this, the speed at which memes are created and distributed has increased, as well. However, it does not seem as if the duration of retention has increased proportionally. Take the previously mentioned memes, *LOLcats* and *Advice Animals*, as an example: according to Google Trends analytics (KnowYourMeme 2008; 2009b; 2011; 2012) the interest for said memes has decreased over time, reaching peak popularity in the mid-2000's to early 2010's. While the former can now be categorized as "historical memes", other memes have instead taken their place and in turn remixed the format further, as in e.g. *Doge* (8), featuring a confused-looking Shiba Inu captioned with scattered superimposed text to narrate a form of interior monologue, or *Distracted Boyfriend* (9), that uses "superimposed text to label objects in some sort of relation to each other" (McCulloch 2019, 252):

(8) Doge (KnowYourMeme 2013)

(9) Distracted Boyfriend (KnowYourMeme 2017)

Although the Internet seems to "unite" (McCulloch 2019, 250) around certain memes, their lifespan can be relatively short – they necessarily "die out". Culture critic Lauren Michele Jackson noticed the tendency as well and argues that it might have something to do with humor. And perhaps accurately so: Davison (2012, 122) defines Internet memes as having a humorous viewpoint. Thus by his definition, an Internet meme is to be interpreted as "a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission."

Jackson (2017) turns the attention to a phenomenon called the "joke cycle", which "describes the kinds of commonplace, well-circulated jokes that become known to mass culture at large." Because of its mass appeal, the joke (or meme, for that matter) will be shared and adjusted – redistributed and remixed – only to fade out over time, and may resurge at a later time. Examples of this are Dead-Baby jokes that became popular during a time of "gendered, domestic changes alongside second-wave feminism" (Jackson 2017). As the name implies, these jokes are centered around dead babies, but despite their crude subject matter they are "a reflection of the age in which it flourishes (…) whether we like it or not" (Dundes 1979, 155). A similar thing happened during the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, when the otherwise harmless character, *Pepe the Frog,* created by artist Matt Furie some ten years earlier, was resurrected and appropriated by the alt-right movement as a comment on the political situation of the time (Jackson 2017). Obscene or not, Internet memes, like *Pepe*, similarly tend to mirror their cultural context, therefore inevitably limiting their lifespan: "new contexts warrant new memes", as Jackson (2017) remarks. While claiming a cause and effect relationship between context and meme cycles can be helpful, it may not account for the entirety of meme life and death. Nevertheless, it goes to show that memes are not stable objects; instead, they are dynamic and prone to change.

2.3 Towards a rhizomatic understanding

Memes die out as fast as they enter the memescape. It thus seem as if Internet memes behave irregularly: their "nature" is not necessarily linear and with a clear genealogy between them. With the appropriation of the term meme into the Internet sphere, there is a necessity to rethink its properties outside of the evolutionary. Rather than behaving purely memetically (as argued by Dawkins), I will propose that Internet memes should instead be understood within a rhizomatic framework as formulated by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.

As with Dawkins' idea of the meme, the rhizome is an analogy derived from the field of biology. Deleuze and Guattari view the rhizome as the antithesis to the tree-root: where the tree develops its roots through a binary logic, the rhizome, on the other hand, resists this form of organizational structure. If we were to view the rhizome as a model for culture, it represents an abstract network "in the middle": it is non-hierarchical, has neither up nor down, nor right or left (Adkins 2015, 24).

The rhizome is non-hierarchical, but not without connections. Connections within the rhizome can be created between anything, and so they should be. This process of connection making, Deleuze and Guattari calls "lines of flights". A line of flight is a rupture in the rhizome that has the *possibility* of making a connection, although it might not do so. The line of flight can thus be considered an

experiment towards something new or as Adkins (2015, 24) puts it, a "tendency towards change." Although, "[a] rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot" it will "start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines" (Deleuze & Guattari 2015, 8). The unpredictability and arbitrary connections is what keeps the rhizome open-ended, constantly in flux, and ever-changing.

Internet memes could be argued to behave in a similar way: although memes have a tendency to "die out", causing the memescape to shatter, new memes will necessarily emerge. The so-called fragmentation of the memescape and the following production of new memes is, within a rhizomatic framework, simply a result of lines of flights, or more generally put, experimentations.

Not only is the rhizome adamant to hierarchy, it is also anti-genealogical as it is "amenable to any structural or generative model" (11). This is linked to Deleuze and Guattari's idea of cartography. They argue that the rhizome is a map, rather than a tracing, which comes out of reproduction. While an exact reproduction can be great to an extent, they are also somewhat limiting. A reproduction necessarily entails a starting point, an original idea, to which it conforms and consequently reproduces that very same idea over and over again. Adkins (2015, 30) refers to these as "arborescent principles" (i.e. characterized by the insistence on principles of binarism and dualism) and this is ultimately how the aforementioned tree-root structure is generated. A map, on the other hand, is open due to its experimentations with lines of flights. It is not a representation of anything else; rather, every connection produces its own autonomous outcome: "The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation" (Deleuze & Guattari 2015, 12).

Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome rejects the cultural evolutionary thought proposed by Dawkins' meme. Within a rhizomatic framework, Internet memes should be considered experimental, yet arbitrarily interrelated connections that form a network, a map, rather than they should be considered a generative structure. Moreover, the Dawkinsian meme's success is determined by its ability to survive and is therefore in constant competition with other memes, whereas the rhizome dismantles any form of hierarchy: a meme becoming popular, or a meme dying, is not an indication of it being better or worse than its peers. Lastly, the rhizome theory also raises an important point about the human intervention in the formation of the rhizome. Internet memes do not just arise out of nothing; individual, as well as group actors create, distribute, and remix them for other Internet people to engage with. And so, memes are not only autonomous digital artifacts with a life on their own: they are also an expression of social interaction.

3. Atoms of culture: The social features of Internet memes

While the previously mentioned strategies for repackaging (see 2.2.1) are consistent with Dawkins' terminology, the fact that the meme is more or less (theoretically) analogous to a virus has been pointed out as problematic. Henry Jenkins et al. (2009) point out that the biological metaphor of both meme and viral contributes to confuse the "power relations between producers, texts, and consumers." Furthermore, Jenkins et al. (2009) claim that the idea of them being infectious ultimately "reduces consumers to the involuntary 'hosts' of media viruses" – or, in other words, it diminishes the agency of the individual actors who create, remix, and distribute said media.

Until now, I have not made any distinctions when it comes to the specific features of Internet memes, except for their creation and distribution. Dawkins' meme-gene analogy, and to some extent the rhizomatic approach as well, only goes as far as to serve as theoretical framework to understand the propagation/transmission of Internet memes. This, in turn, leaves out their social features and implications. Dawkins himself has even acknowledged the precarity of the association with the original conception of memes with its online counterpart, specifically in terms of "their formation, spread, but most importantly due to the (…) need of human–computer interaction to further their development" (Wiggins 2019, 8). In a speech held by Dawkins (2013), he remarks the following:

> [T]he very idea of the meme, has itself mutated and evolved in a new direction. An Internet meme is a hijacking of the original idea. Instead of mutating by random chance, before spreading by a form of Darwinian selection, Internet memes are altered deliberately by human creativity. In the hijacked version, mutations are designed - not random - with the full knowledge of the person doing the mutating.

People are integral to the production of memes and when discussing Internet memes, one cannot simply leave out their social dimensions. Internet memes, after all, are culturally significant, not only as digital artifacts, but also as examples of social interactions. The American Folklife Center (a research center under The Library of Congress) even deemed the phenomena so significant that it has archived the encyclopedia-style database, KnowYourMeme (Campbell-Dollaghan, 2017), which seeks to document and explain a wide array of different Internet memes.

With this in mind, Internet memes could arguably be considered a form of contemporary folklore. The late folklorist Alan Dundes (2007, 59) describes folklore as a mirror of culture, as it "reflects (and thereby reinforces) the value configurations of the folk, but at the same time folklore

provides a sanctioned form of escape from these very same values." Furthermore, the mirroring also entails an "autobiographical ethnography" (55) – meaning that it is a people's, or a certain culture's, description of themselves. In similar ways, Internet memes can be seen as tools for self-identification and group belonging. Internet memes thus capture a glimpse of a shared culture, which is shaped by the people who *participate* in their making and distribution.

3.1 Shaping the memescape: Participatory culture

The departure from old media (i.e. print, radio, and television) and the move towards new – digital – media (which entails e.g. "personalization, user-generated content, algorithmic news feeds [Wiggins 2019, 22]) means that transmission of information and content happens faster than ever and moreover is not limited to just a few media platforms. Furthermore, these new circumstances give rise to a reevaluation of the producer/consumer relationship.

In an attempt to conceptualize the change in relationship and shift in the dynamic between new and old media, Jenkins (2006, 2) uses the term convergence to exemplify "the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences." It is important to note, though, that convergence does not happen "automatically", i.e. the media appliances themselves do not initiate creates/distributes content. Rather, it is "individual consumers and (…) their social interactions with each other" (3) that facilitate the convergence. The term "consumer", however, seems to uphold the notion of "passive media spectatorship" (3). Instead, Jenkins argues that the line between media producers and consumers has blurred, so that they now may be seen as "participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands" (3). Together, the individual participants constitute a participatory culture that uses, as well as creates participatory media. Jenkins (132) relates the concept of participatory culture to older forms of folk culture because the "current moment of media change is reaffirming the right of everyday people to actively contribute to their culture" but also because a participatory culture (like a folk culture) "encourages broad participation [and] grassroots creativity."

As an example of participatory culture, Shifman (2014, 25-26) mentions *Kilroy Was Here* – a pre-Internet meme. The drawing is of a man with a long nose looking over a wall and features the caption "Kilroy Was Here." It was launched during World War II and began to pop up in almost any place accessible to Allied soldiers. The origins of the meme are still contested to this day, but nonetheless, the meme made it around the world (quite literally). The simplicity of the doodle made it easy to reproduce – just as Internet memes are. Morever, "this lack of obvious meaning made the meme hard

to contradict and, at the same time, enhanced people's engagement with it" (26). Because of its mysteriousness consequently leaving it open-ended, it became a meme that people could easily feel ownership over, while simultaneously being a part of a larger collective – a participatory culture – by sharing it.

What this highlights is the need for applying these thoughts in the context of Internet memes. If one does not manage to acknowledge the social aspect of memes, they are merely reduced to stagnant and immobile items in the webiverse: if no one had engaged with *Kilroy Was Here*, it would not have been able to spread as it did. But, by embracing the involvement of participants (occupying both roles as consumers and producers) as their creators and distributors, Internet memes instead begin to embody the dynamic properties proposed by Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome theory (see section 2.3). The social aspect of Internet memes does not arise out of them being ever-changing and experimental; Internet memes *are* these things, *because* of the collective, participatory social interaction that is the creation, modification and spread of them.

4. Making sense of the arbitrary: Internet memes as a form of communication

Besides having creational/distributive as well as social features, memes are also communicative; "[c]ommunication is in essence inescapable" when dealing with Internet memes, as Wiggins (2019, 6) remarks. Furthermore, Wiggins (24) argues that "human beings construct reality not in terms of the actual physical world but the world of social relations. Meaning is created and negotiated by human agential action." Meaning making thus becomes a social practice: by being socially transmitted, memes become bearers of meaning. Though in order to be truly meaningful, they will have to be recognized as communications, which in turn requires a method of deciphering of both intention and context.

In this section, I will focus on the form of communication that Internet memes can be considered as. I will explore some of their linguistic features by bridging theories from the fields of (social) semiotics (i.e. "processes of meaning making across groups in society" [5]) as well as pragmatics. Lastly, I will attempt to apply the discussed theories to specific Internet memes in order to interpret their possible meaning.

4.1 Internet memes as multimodal semiotic signs

Milner (2012, 23-26) argues that Internet memes can be interpreted as being fundamentally multimodal. Multimodality, as defined by Jewitt (2013, 250), is "an interdisciplinary approach drawn from social semiotics that understands communication and representation as more than language and attends systematically to the social interpretation of a range of forms of making meaning." Furthermore, multimodality can:

> (…) be understood as a response to the demands to look beyond language in a rapidly changing social and technological landscape. It is curious to understand how the use of digital technologies extends the range of resources for communication, [and] reshapes the relationship between resources such as image and writing (252).

A multimodal approach to memes recognizes the involvement of a social context, as well as both modes and media in their communication that thus shape the meaning and consequent interpretation of them. Media refers to the technologies through which dissemination happens, e.g. newspapers, radio, television, or the Internet. Modes, on the other hand, are technologies of representation, such as "written language, image, audio, video, and hypertext" (24). The medium of memes is the Internet, more specifically social media platforms, and the modes it carries can vary; but because this paper is dealing with image macros in particular, the modes in this case are written language (text) and image.

The modes that are applied in the meme are semiotics resources through which meaning is installed. This is what makes it possible for Internet memes to be categorized as semiotic (Internet) signs, as argued by Sara Cannizzaro (2016). Furthermore, in an attempt to expand Saussurean semiotics, Barthes ([1957] 1980, 110-111) argues that both representations, such as (written) texts and images, can be considered as signs and consequently interpreted. In continuation, according to the Italian semiotician Umberto Eco (1984, 16, his own italics) the production of a sign necessarily entails an "*intention of communicating,* that is, in order to transmit one's representation or inner state to another being." Though there is a difference between a communicative process and a process of signification. A communicative process is "the passage of a signal (not necessarily a sign) from a source (through a transmitter, along a channel) to a destination" (Eco 1976, 8). Thus in the communicative process, only a transferring of information takes place. The process of signification, on the other hand, also involves a recipient that then interprets the information based on a shared code. A code can be said to be the social and cultural context in which the signification occurs.

Because Internet memes can be considered multimodal signs, Varis and Blommaert (2015, 36) argue that this enables what they call a process of "resemiotization." Resemiotization is about "how meaning making shifts from context to context, from practice to practice, or from one stage of a practice to the next" (Iedema 2003, 41). In the context of memes, this means that when the meme is being modified/remixed (the sign is altered), its meaning changes as well because of its new context. Memes have a high semiotic productivity and can virtually produce an infinite amount of resemiotizations. As examples, Varis and Blommaert (37-38) use a British World War II poster as seen in (10) that undergoes different resemiotizations as shown in (11) and (12):

(10) British World War II poster

(11) Example of resemiotization: "Keep calm and call Batman."

(12) Example of resemiotization: "Keep calm and drink beer."

The memes in (11) and (12) have both been subject to resemiotization: that is, their meanings have shifted because of their new context. The variations in the themes of the memes are what distinguish them (gives them new contexts), yet the graphic template (i.e. "graphic features of lettering and layout" [37]) is more or less constant. This is what allows for them to be intertextually related to each other, meaning that "a given text does not exist as an independent or closed unit or system" (Wiggins 2019, 34). Wiggins (35, his own italics) expands on the intertextuality of Internet memes by arguing that:

> [t]he point here is that intertextuality should not be thought of as mere associations with other texts, for the singular purpose of adding meaning. Rather, intertextuality is purposeful, unavoidable, and ubiquitous. It is less helpful to think of individual texts referring to other texts in the process of making meaning as *intertextual*. Instead all texts are *inter-texts*: references to other content, citations to previous work, allusions, parody, pastiche, etc. permeate all texts, and this is especially relevant and applicable to internet memes as a genre of online communication.

In an attempt to consolidate this with earlier findings, one could say that a participant initiates the process of resemiotization in order to communicate a meaning in a social setting. The resemiotizations correspond with lines of flights which have the possibility to produce a change in the meme or an entirely new meme altogether. However, that the meme is altered serves as a change in context, as well, which will entail a process of signification of the meme by the recipient. As soon as this has happened, the recipient (who is also a participant) can initiate the process of resemiotization all over again to communicate a response or simply a new statement.

4.2 Myth-making: Internet memes as speech acts

In the previous section, I have explored how meaning making is integral to the communicative functions of memes. However, one would have to know how to interpret/decipher them in order for them to reach their potential as fully meaningful communications. In *Mythologies* ([1957] 1980), Barthes offers a method on how to do so. Referring to the etymology of the word, "myth" is, according to Barthes (109), a type of speech. The word "myth" is derived from the ancient Greek "mythos" and means e.g. a story, tale, or legend - anything word-of-mouth, really. Myths are semiotic signs that function as speech and are thus messages "endowed with meaning" (110).

That myth is defined as a form of speech does not necessarily require a spoken communication, that is, one that is performed by a human uttering a string of sounds. To Barthes (110), speech is "by no means confined to oral speech. It can consist of modes of writing or of representations; not only written discourse, but also photography, cinema, reporting, sport, shows, publicity." Grundlingh (2018, 161), too, argues that speech acts also can apply to written communications, as well as memes (specifically image macros). Speech acts are studied within the field of pragmatics, which therefore positions the communicative functions of Internet memes at the intersection between semiotics and

pragmatics; where semiotics gives meaning to the meme, pragmatics can be used to interpret what the meaning is.

A speech act is a trichotomy that consists of the locutionary act, the illocutionary act and the perlocutionary act. Grundlingh (151) defines them as the following:

> The locutionary act involves the production of sounds and the production of words. The illocutionary act refers to performing one of the functions of language, that is, the act of saying something. The perlocutionary act refers to the effects (intended and unintended) that result from saying something.

All three acts include a "speaker (S), hearer (H), expression (e), language (L) and the context of the utterance (C)" and thus, the utterance can be defined as, "S utter e from L to H in C" (151). In the case of memes, the speaker instead becomes the creator, and the hearer the receiver (161). The utterance can be considered similar to Eco's (1984) notion of a semiotic communicative process.

In order for the illocutionary act to be a successful communication, the receiver (hearer, H) will have to recognize said act and respond accordingly. As before, this can be considered to correspond to the signification process as formulated by Eco (1984). In speech act theory, intention and context are two factors that affect both recognition and response when the illocutionary act is performed. The intention of the illocutionary act can be described as "that which the speaker wants the hearer or reader to recognize in a communication" (152). In order to attribute meaning to any utterance, there has to be a context to it. This can be referred to as the "assumed common ground" (153), i.e. some form of shared background information, assumptions, and beliefs between the participants of the communication, and is similar to the codes identified by Eco, which were mentioned in the previous section.

In attempting to apply what has been discussed above to the memes in examples (11) and (12), one could interpret their respective intentions as statements – or perhaps opinions – that focus on Batman in (11) and beer in (12). Their context, however, can be harder to determine. What makes Internet memes unique as a form of communication are their (often) multilayered, intertextual contexts, which are made possible by the process of resemiotization. In order to determine the context of the memes shown in (11) and (12), one would have to connect it to that of the source (10). Example (10) is a poster that was used by the British government during the time leading up to World War II as a motivational message to – as the text states – "keep calm and carry on" even through the ensuing

years of hardship. The illocutionary acts of the resemiotized memes represented in (11) and (12) are only successful if the background information is a shared common ground between the creator and receiver, through which the receiver can interpret them and respond accordingly.

4.2.1 How to do things with humor

The illocutionary act has the possibility of taking on different functions – and so can Internet memes. As earlier mentioned, one possible function, though, is that they can be considered jokes, as argued by Davison (2012) (see section 2.2.2). Yet, jokes seem to violate the rules of performing a successful illocutionary act and are therefore not considered a function of such, because "jokes depend upon the ambiguity of utterances as illocutionary acts, that is, the speech act intended by the speaker/writer is unclear and open to misinterpretation" (Goatly 2012, 216). However, jokes have the possibility of being successfully understood because they consist of certain characteristics that define them. Grundlingh (2018, 163) identifies these as: "a set-up, an incongruity and a resolution." Moreover, the joke also has to include a so-called disjunctor (more commonly referred to as a punchline) in order to reach the resolution (Goatly 2012, 22).

While perhaps not fully-fledged jokes, the memes in (11) and (12) could, nonetheless, be considered to have a humorous point of view which is used to express an opinion or comment on something. If one were to apply the characteristics of jokes defined above to the memes seen in (11) and (12), their interpretation could be as follows: the set-up in both instances is the initial "keep calm"-line, whereas the punchline and following resolution is represented in the final text, which is "call Batman" in (11) and "drink beer" (12). As they are intertextually connected to (10), their context could be interpreted as referring to a state of hardship or chaos. The meme in (11) thus humorously expresses that when in times of hardship one should call upon Batman (a superhero vigilante that bringers order to chaos), whereas (12) implies that turning to beer drinking is a way of overcoming hardship. The communication that examples (11) and (12) represent is also reliant on the memes being able to resonate in a social context where participants will subsequently distribute them, possibly inspiring variations or completely new memes to emerge.

5. Conclusion

Internet memes are important digital artifacts. They are dynamic and ever-changing atoms of culture, as they are being distributed all over the Internet. Internet memes thus represent new form of communication that rely on participants of a participatory culture to create and distribute as well as

modify them. They are interactive, so to say, meaning that they rely on the social interactions of said participants to be able to communicate any form of meaning. This paper has sought to explore the sociolinguistic potential of Internet memes: that is, how society and language interact to form a new practice of communication that has social implications.

In the first section, I took a close look at the origin of the term "meme" as formulated by Richard Dawkins in 1976. A meme, according to Dawkins, serves as a cultural counterpart to genes that are able to replicate cultural information through its transmission from one brain to another. With its consequent appropriation into Internet discourse, I found that what is understood by memes in a digital environment, as Internet memes (cf. Shifman's definition), is different from the original conception of the term, but that it shares some similarities, especially in regards to distribution. Yet, by further exploring different aspects of the creation and distribution of Internet memes (i.e. the difference between viral media and Internet memes, as well as the "life and death" of Internet memes) I was able to contest Dawkins' view. By arguing in favor of a rhizomatic approach, as formulated by Deleuze and Guattari, in regards to Internet memes, allowed for them to be understood in a social context that Dawkins' (somewhat limited) concept did not include.

The second section dealt with the social features of Internet memes. By comparing memes to contemporary folklore, they could in turn be viewed as a form of participatory culture, which – according to Jenkins (2006) – can be related to older folk cultures. Rather than viewing the people involved in the culture as producers and consumers, participatory culture enables people to be both, which is conceptualized in the term "participant". By discussing an example of participatory culture, I stress the importance of understanding memes being viewed as social, because it is the participatory act in itself that allows for them to be created, distributed and modified.

In the last section, I explored Internet memes as a form communication. By studying Internet memes at the intersection of the linguistic disciplines of multimodality, semiotics and pragmatics, I was able to interpret the communicative meaning of a limited set of examples of Internet memes.

In summary, the sociolinguistic potential of Internet memes can be said to rely on the complex relation between creation, distribution, social interactions and communication of Internet memes. I have attempted to approach this potential: however, I must acknowledge that further extensive research can be done on the topic. Internet memes can still be considered a relatively "young" phenomenon, but as long as the Internet and its users keep creating content and communicating through memes, research on this topic can be conducted, possibly providing valuable insights into Internet memes; making it just as dynamic as the digital artifacts that it seeks to discuss.

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